

Russian and Harlem Quilters Come Together for Exhibit

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A new exhibit in Harlem will display quilts from Russian artists and African-American artists

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HARLEM — The quilts were stitched a world apart, but they bear out similarities in Russian and African-American culture.

A new exhibit opening in June called "Pieced Together. Russia Meets Harlem. Patchwork & Quilts," will display quilts from Russian artists and African-American artists side-by-side in a bid to show how the similarities outweigh the differences.

"People from two nations so far apart were able to express themselves with the same material," said Marina Kovalyov, president of the [Russian American Foundation, which organized the exhibit](#).

"The best opportunity for people to learn about one another is the arts," said Kovalyov. "And this art comes from the roots of both cultures."

Kovalyov was very familiar with Russian quilts, but was so impressed by the similarities when she was introduced to the African-American quilting tradition that she thought others might be equally fascinated. The techniques used to create the quilts are similar and they often depict important images from each culture.

Scholars already believe that there was artistic crossover between the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Alaine Locke and Jean Toomer, and the writings of Russian authors including Fyodor Dostoyevsky, who often wrote about Russian peasant culture and political oppression and persecution.

The African-American quilts depict Jazz and life in Harlem while the Russian quilts show images of Russia and some of that country's fairy tales. Both often show day-to-day life.

Laura Gadson, owner of [The Gadson Gallery](#) in Harlem and co-curator of the exhibit, is herself a quilter.

"This is about two cultures coming together but having similarities," she said. "You have historically different communities whom you wouldn't necessarily think of as creating similar art."

But in researching the Russian quilts, Gadson said she saw the similarities in the bright textiles used. And like African-American artists, quilting was more than just a utilitarian practice. It helped artists to express themselves.

"The story subjects of the Harlem quilters tend to have African influences while the story quilts from Russia have mythical and children's stories. We both go back and tell cultural stories," said Gadson who hopes to exhibit one of her works.

The exhibit will be displayed at the [National Arts Club](#) from June 23 to June 30 as part of the Russian American Foundation's ninth annual Russian Heritage Festival. The group was founded 13 years ago to foster an understanding of Russian heritage in the United States and American culture in the former Soviet Union.

From there, Kovalyov hopes for the exhibit to travel the country.

"We are hoping for people to learn more about both cultures," she said. "This exhibit is the weaving together of one cultural fabric"